

This We Believe  
Proverbs 9.1-6  
August 16, 2015  
Pentecost +12

Two years ago in late August, I attended a conference in Virginia for pastors and deacons. Hundreds of us gathered for a meal then chose between a dozen or more breakout sessions for lectures and discussion. I knew I was coming to St. Charles for a trial sermon. I knew I wanted to be called here and planned to stay a while. I also knew from watching other pastors that staying in a pastorate for years-on-end took intention—laying a foundation of best practices for healthy leadership as well as balancing care of the needs of the church with care of one’s family and care of one’s self. My first breakout session had to do with learning a congregation’s story to best lead in the present and guide toward the future. The second was about Sabbath keeping as pastor. The pastor of two decades described the importance of a weekly day off, a sabbatical quarter every 7th year, and introduced the additional idea of study and writing weeks in the summer.

I stayed to talk with him for a while after the session, told him about you, and he encouraged me to take on this practice because of the way that it energizes and reframes thinking. And so, for two summers, I have set aside time with no appointments, no scheduled office hours, and a summer study list for myself. All of last week I embraced the practice of going away to a quiet place to rest and pray with the added agenda of studying organizational leadership, a little lectionary planning, and attention to every written word on our church web site.

Yes, I spent a lot of time looking at our web site as though for the first time. What do people want to know about us before walking in these doors? I looked at other church web sites to gauge how much or how little they share online. Some had personal “About Us” sections while others have long, detailed “What We Believe” pages with definitive statements on everything from authority of scripture to final judgment and most everything in between. Some are completely up front about who they are, some are vague and leave a lot to the imagination. All of this reading invited me to revisit the question, “Who are we at St. Charles?”

[If you're a first-time guest today or one of our friends who is checking us out on a repeat visit, may this be a bit of a primer for you. In a few minutes, I'll talk about all of us and not just the St. Charles us.]

St. Charles, we know who we were in the 20th century. We know that we contributed to the best of Southern Baptist life in New Orleans and beyond back when that denomination was ours. We know that over 9000 people called themselves members of this congregation at some point in its first 100 years. Many of us know what we consider the "best" years of St. Charles and can quickly go there in our mind's eye. However, almost all of that good, good stuff is now filed under the "History" part of our web site and not "Who Are We?" Even after almost two years here as pastor, I realize "Who Are We?" is not a question we all answer in the same way. Because not being pinned down is part of who we are at St. Charles.

I shared with a church member last week that I was thinking of moving away from the Gospel readings for a few weeks and talking about core beliefs instead. This friend then suggested to me last week by email that we delete the "woe-is-me" worship practice of reading a confession in one voice and replace it with affirming one of the creeds, instead. I hear some pastors at St. Charles actually have, on occasion, incorporated a creed into worship, but this is hard for the most Baptist parts of me.

In response to this email query, I shared, "Part of why I remain Baptist is the fact that no one gets to tell me what I have to believe and affirm. And, even as pastor, I don't get to force that on anyone else. That being said, we do hold some things in common and do hold some things as Truth. I'm working through the identity statement that we put together last Fall, and I hope that can at least take hold as a central theme. Maybe central theme is as close as I get to creed."

So we'll do just that for the next 4 weeks. Who we are is wrapped up in the central themes we hold in common. And it's a little wrapped up in a shared disdain for being pinned down as well as a shared love for being free individuals with all kinds of thoughts and dreams and personalities that we bring to this place.

Last fall we spent the better part of two months crafting a new identity statement. We asked is it a mission statement, a vision statement, a goal, a present reality? We

landed on the idea of identity because it includes who we are and who we are becoming. After several Wednesday nights and at least two Sunday mornings, two rounds of printed surveys and at least one Sermon, the compiled results were given to our Outreach team who crafted the sentence on the back, center of your bulletin under "About Us." I invite you to read it with me:

At St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, we aspire to serve God by asking questions, loving neighbors, seeking justice, and welcoming all.

I will spend the next four weeks exploring each quadrant of this statement.<sup>1</sup> What does it mean to live out a faith of asking, seeking, loving, and welcoming?

Ask: It is discipleship, yes. Asking is also about a general curiosity and openness to life. That includes an openness to being wrong, to telling the truth, to digging deeper.

Seek: If we are justice seeking people, then we are describing an action in the world, an awareness of self. The week we examine Seeking falls on the 10th anniversary after Katrina. We'll consider what it means to be people who profess a call to justice seeking in *this* particular city at *this* particular time.

Love: This one is easy, right? Well...easy until we begin living it out. Loving is carried out in the mundane; kindness, patience, gentleness; loving the people around us in ways that carry us beyond ourselves

Welcome: Welcoming all is a beautiful sentiment, and we give a lot of print space on the back of our bulletin to being people who welcome. It is also easier said than done. Because there are lines we won't cross. There are boundaries here; our own orthodoxy. An easy example: if you think women should remain silent in church, this place probably isn't for you. And yet, we are still called to love and to welcome even when we find ourselves on opposite sides of a line neither will cross—and maybe even to bless those on the other side. What does that look like?

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Scott Bond for designing the image on the front of the bulletin for this five week series.

Many of us are reading Rachel Held Evans' *Searching for Sunday* right now as a summer book series. I thought of St. Charles as I read her description of the very first followers of Jesus. She writes:

"It's tough to identify exactly what the first followers of Jesus had in common. The Gospels speak of Jews and Gentiles, soldiers and farmers, men and women, rich and poor, sick and well, religious and nonreligious. No two people interacted with Jesus in exactly the same way, and few engaged in lengthy theological discussions or made a direct profession of faith before dropping their fishing nets, water jars, crutches, and money purses to follow this man who promised forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. It certainly wasn't shared belief that brought them together. Nowhere do the Gospels speak of converts reciting the 'sinner's prayer' or signing a doctrinal statement or pledging allegiance to a creed. One of the first Christian missionaries, known as the woman at the well, was a Samaritan who sparred with Jesus over the details of when and where the people of God should worship. She was joined by devout Jews, Gentiles, zealots, tax collectors, conservatives, liberals, widows, fishermen, wealthy benefactresses, and impoverished beggars.

It wasn't shared social status or ethnicity that brought Jesus' followers together either, nor was it total agreement on exactly who this Jesus character was—a prophet? the Messiah? the Son of God? No, if there is one thing that connected all these dissimilar people together it was a shared sense of need: a hunger, a thirst, a longing. It was certainly that, when Jesus said he came for the sick, this meant Jesus came for *me*.<sup>2</sup>

Quite often, Jesus dined with this disparate group of followers. And quite often, Jesus described blessing and breaking bread in his name or told stories of the kind of banquets that God throws— parties with tables covered for a feast and anyone willing to join the party is welcome. If you want to know what God's kingdom is like, Jesus would say, it's like a host who prepares a table with every good thing and throws open the doors to invite the whole city inside.

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, pp. 91-92

We walk into that tradition this morning in Proverbs chapter 9 as Wisdom, the wise teacher, invites us onto the pathway of life. She is “the firstborn, beloved child of God, in whom the Creator takes delight.”<sup>3</sup> In the larger scene of chapter 9, we read that Wisdom has built her house, slaughtered her animals, mixed her wine, set her table, and sent the invitation to all who wish to live and walk in the way of insight.

Then there is Folly who lazily sits at the door of her house merely calling to those who pass by, “Turn in here!” She offers a poor meal that hides the fact that she is really only offering death. “They do not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.”<sup>4</sup>

Brite Divinity School’s Will Gaffney writes, “Wisdom’s table is a metaphor for the acquisition of wisdom. But what is wisdom? It is more than innate intelligence or sense; for it can be gained by those who lack it. In Biblical Hebrew, wisdom is as much technical expertise or craft(wo)manship as it is intellectual knowledge...it is heart-and-hand knowledge -- for the Israelites, the heart (not the head) was the source thought and choice.”<sup>5</sup>

Who are you? What do you believe? Wisdom says, “Show me how you live your life, show me how you spend your time, show me what you create by the work of your hands, and I will see what you believe.” Wisdom is about the process of linking the stuff of our faith with the stuff of our lives. This is not warm beliefs to articulate then ignore. This is about the Way of our days—is it a way of death? is it a way of life? Are we surrounded by God’s abundance? Do we open our eyes and realized we’ve walked into hell on earth?

Scott Shauf notes, “The connection between wisdom and life is frequently made in Proverbs, often artfully so: ‘For whoever finds me finds life’ (8:35a); ‘Long life is in her right hand...She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her’ (3:16a, 18a). To accept wisdom’s invitation is to embrace the life that God has designed for us.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Leo G. Perdue, *Interpretation: Proverbs*, p. 147

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 9.18

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1360](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1360)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2601](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2601)

This is surely what John has in mind when he tells us that Jesus has come that we might have life and have it to the full.<sup>7</sup>

Proverbs offers these images as two ways that present themselves both to ancient people and to readers today. What are we about? Who are we? These are not simply questions to answer on our web site. These are questions for us as a church, these are questions for each of us. "Be careful then how you live," writes Paul to the church at Ephesus, "not as unwise people but as wise." What path are we following? Whose Way are we on? Wisdom or folly. We order our lives around something. What is it? What will it be?

I also challenge you to pay attention to your life in these weeks. If the Way of Wisdom is heart-and-hand, believing and doing, what does your life say about your faith? What do you hold most dear? What are the common themes? What is the guiding Truth? Listen to your life for Wisdom as we consider, all of us and each of us, just what it is that we believe. Then we'll explore these questions for the next month as we Ask, Seek, Love, and Welcome together.

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<sup>7</sup> John 10.10